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Marking Time: The Significance of National Days

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In this book, we have presented a number of instances of national days, and certain features are clear. First of all, there is no single template. It is far less which national days are chosen; rather, who they are chosen by and for what purposes. What we certainly do not find is a set of distinct national days, still less a single National Day. In many societies, we find a plethora: some have their roots in religious patronage; others in key time markers in the political-constitutional calendar; while others are liberation days, conquest days, defeat days. Some days are reconditioned days, ditching an embarrassing history or given new meanings, more in keeping with the times. Some celebrate victories; others losses. Some are celebrated comprehensively, with parades and carnivals, others are very low-key, yet others are partial and contingent and a few are non-existent, so that, like Sherlock Holmes, we may assume that the significance lies in the dog that does not bark. Some are heavily political, with marching bands and serious military parades; others are mainly cultural and ludic; some embody both. Others may be so objectionable, that we want them actively unremembered, or even banned. For example, neo-fascists marching to celebrate Hitler's birthday are engaged in an extreme political act designed to incite and inflame.

The significance of national days

We might ask: if there is so much variation in terms of national days, are they about anything? Do they have any uniform meaning? The answer to that is no; but that significance lies in their very flexibility. These days are not like personal birthdays: immutable objectively set and observed with high degrees of commonality and commoditisation.

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The one thing which they all have in common, however, is that they are key markers in national biography. In other words, nations, like people, have biographies. Benedict Anderson concludes his book *Imagined Communities* with this comment:

> As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity – product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century – engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity' (1991: 205).

Of course, Anderson observes, people are not like nations. People are born, live and die. Nations do not, at least not quite in that form. 'Nations', he comments, 'have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural.' (*op. cit.*) Anderson, of course, has spoken of nations moving calendrically through time, and so there are time-lines; time is marked. We might say that just as individuals are made distinct by markers of their birth, death, marriage, divorce (it would be difficult to imagine any two people having identical time-lines), so nations have their identity, their distinctiveness, marked in unique ways. Karen Cerulo (1995: 57) observed that national days 'acknowledge a figurative "starting line" that separates each nation's history from that of all the others. Such symbols enforce a sense of inclusion and exclusion, a boundedness that is vital to every nation's identity'.

Whether we are simply comparing nations and individuals metaphorically or not, there is mileage in the notion of marking time. There are, of course, annual markers – birthdays, most obviously – as well as anniversaries which allow us to take stock, to ask: how are we doing compared with this time last year/decade/century? There are ritual commemorations for big events, the equivalent of the jubilees, as well as the quiet forgetting of embarrassing moments, and the rewriting of history to make it more acceptable and appealing. The further back we can go, what Anderson calls 'up-time', the more legitimate it seems, especially if others dispute our right to exist. In other words, a national narrative is vital in the right of the nation to exist. Sometimes, most unusually in the case of the United States, there is a daily not merely an annual ritual; saluting the flag on a daily basis, makes it routine or 'banal'. After a while, it becomes automatic and unthinking; it is, after all, who we are, what we do, both individual and nation fused together. Sometimes, unusually, a date takes on multiple significance. Take 11th September. At

the time of the Scottish referendum in 1999, a Catalan observer noted to one of the authors that it was taking place on the Catalan national day, and wondered if that was deliberate, given their similar status as 'stateless nations'. (The answer was no.) A few years later, the date took on much more widespread and murderous significance: it was 9/11. There are few if any dates which require less explication (even if expressed in the American inverted form with month before date), nor the year in which it took place (2001) which many people cannot recall. 9/11, on the other hand, became objectified, a shorthand for terror.[1]

It is a reasonable commonplace for national narratives to be marked not simply by dates but by iconic years (to take the Scottish case: 1314, 1603, 1707, 1999).[2] These may, or may not, be marked annually if they are of special significance (and the actual dates of each of these has no national significance). The point about marking time in this way is that it allows us to carve out the distinctive time-lines of national identity, and to plot the national narrative.

All of this implies, of course, that we know who this 'we' is whom we are talking about; that there is a common 'we'. What this book has tried to do is to show how uncommon that 'we' is. Struggles over national dates and events are not some petty squabble, but deadly serious issues over whose narrative it is anyway. Thus, regimes seek to impose an ideology by means of the enforced holiday (as in Germany in the Nazi period). Choosing one date over another raises hackles. Thus in Finland, 16th May was seen as a 'white' day, whereas the alternative 6th December was opposed by the Right. In Australia, 26th January is the national day despite (or perhaps because) it was the day the British fleet landed in 1788; a day of mourning among the Aboriginal peoples. It might have seemed sensible to turn to Anzac day (25th April) which marks the slaughter at Gallipoli, but the veterans objected to losing their own special time marker. Indeed, 11th November (11/11) has turned into remembrance days in many countries, running together commemorations of the twentieth century war dead. Nor are actual days very obvious. The Norwegian national day is 17th May, the day the constitution was designed in 1814, and not Independence day, 1905. Sweden's 6th June did not become the official national day until 2005, although it had been celebrated unofficially since 1893 as the day Gustavus Vasa was crowned in 1523, and the day of the new constitution in 1809. One might only conclude that there is something unpredictable and serendipitous about national days. Days are contentious. Thus, in Valencia, 9th October originally marked the Christian conquest in the 13th century, and began as a religious celebration with political and cultural over-

tones. By the 1980s to 90s, the post-transition period after Franco, there was a split between right and left, before it was 'festivised' since 2003. Perhaps the most iconic leftist day is May Day, which as a workers' festival dates back to the 1890s, but one which coincided with significant seasonal change. Eric Hobsbawm (1986: 284) observes that 'From the start the occasion attracted and absorbed ritual and symbolic elements, notably that of a quasi-religious or numinous celebration …'. May Day played a key role in the development of socialist iconography for the organised working class, and pointed up the importance of ritual public spaces.

So these days are often bounded by a need for recognition of the nation (as a geo-political entity) and a 'moment' frozen in time for that recognition to be codified into consciousness. That moment (a day – but why not an hour, a week, a month?) symbolises and memorialises struggle – armed or political or religious – and encourages reflection upon the significance of the past as a part of the present.

Inventing the nation: The case of France

We cannot, however, assume that national days have fixed and essentialised messages. Much depends on symbolic struggle and capture. One of the most famous national days is Bastille Day in France which Hobsbawm cites as a key example of public ceremonies with their 'general tendency … to transform the heritage of the Revolution into a combined expression of state pomp and power and the citizens' pleasure' (1986: 271). In an important chapter in the magnum opus of Pierre Nora, *Lieux de Mémoire*, Amalvi (1998: 118) explains how it was that 14th July became the national day. It was not because, in Victor Hugo's words, 'great dates evoke great memories. Some moments deserve to be commemorated as glorious'. Rather, in the 1880s, there was fierce controversy over which day would be designated as the national day. *Le Quatorze Juillet, la fête nationale*, would seem to be a more natural 'republican' choice, associated as it was with the fall of the Bastille 100 years previously, a *rupture* between old and new worlds, and it was accepted as the 'least-worst' in the Third Republic. Initially, the Right took 'negative' actions, such as not ringing the church bells, and having recourse to 'spiritual weapons'. A decade later, the quiet campaign of the Right had failed, in part because the state had encouraged 'popular' events for the lower classes, and because the introduction of a military parade at Longchamp helped to mollify the Right. Ironically, after 1918, it was the radical Left who denounced 14th July

as an expression of bourgeois nationalism, which probably did no harm to its being embraced by the Right. The victory of the Popular Front in 1936 possibly helped to coalesce Leftist support once more, and after 1945, it quickly became a national icon with liberation from the Nazis. Today, concludes Amalvi (1998: 158): 'it seems clear that the memory of the Revolution in general and of 14th July in particular now belongs to the entire nation, transcending political differences'.

Pierre Nora concurs that the French republic had particular and unusual advantages: 'France is a country which, at a single stroke, with the definitive establishment of the Republic in 1880, gave itself a national emblem, a national anthem, a national holiday, a national motto, all incorporating themes from the French Revolution' (1998: 9). France, he observes, is a *nation of memory*, just as Jews are a *people of memory*. In this regard, France is only unusual in degree rather than kind, because many countries have been subjected to, in Nora's words, 'tidal waves of memory … a bedlam of commemorations, a mushrooming of museums, a revitalisation of tradition in all its forms. No era has ever been as much a prisoner of its memory, as subject to its empire and its law' (*ibid*: xii).

And yet, Nora doubts that in the modern world we are as tied into the national memory as we once were. What he describes as this 'major event in a regular cycle of secular ritual and scholastic liturgy' (*ibid*: xi), this France '*une et indivisible*' has become problematic. This results from the subversion and collapse of the classical model of national commemoration invented by the revolution and consolidated by the Third Republic. By the late 20th century, commemoration had been transformed, and replaced by 'a loosely organised system of disparate commemorative languages, which assume a different kind of relationship with the past; one that is more elective than imperative and that is plastic, alive, and subject to perpetual elaboration' (1998: 614). France is no exception to these global trends. Whereas the classical – modernist – model was conceived in terms of order and hierarchy, now there is no central principle: 'each subject to the overlapping and intersecting influences of the media, the tourist trade, the entertainment industry, and advertising and marketing' (*ibid*: 615). It is not so much what the past imposes on us, but how we mould what passes for the past to our own purposes. This, he says, is a capricious past which has lost its peremptory and constraining organic character. The shift is from '*patrimoine*' to 'heritage' such that commemoration becomes thin, mobile and indistinct. France, for example, has shifted from having a

unified national consciousness to a fragmented, partial one. '*Le patrimoine* no longer stands for the overall collective identity of the society as a whole; instead, it has become a constituent part of sub-group identity, of a social category perceived exclusively in terms of its cultural dimension' (*ibid*: 632).

And yet one might take issue with Nora's account. The history of the 14th July, *la fête nationale*, is conflicting and contested. Christian Amalvi's account of Bastille Day makes it clear that it involved a political and cultural struggle to have it established in 1880, the end of a 'hundred years' war' over the revolution of 1789. Thereafter, one finds a continuous struggle between Right and Left over the ownership of the national day, not resolved until after the Second World War. Amalvi agrees that *le quatorze juillet* has diminished significantly in French national life, and he argues that once it used to mark the end of the school year and was the secular equivalent of Easter. The fact that it has become de-politicised and 'festivalised', he argues, means that it no longer has a major stake in the battle for collective memory. Somehow, the argument goes, the national day only remains alive if it is fought over; but in being fought over, it *cannot* be consensual. There is an element, one might argue, of romantic retrospect here. That 'once' – possibly in the period of 'modernity', let us say from late 19th to late 20th century, it was central to the nationalising project, and now is no longer. But Amalvi's account makes it plain that it was highly contested throughout the 'modern' period, and especially in the 1880s onwards. The national myth, perhaps, was always that – a historical artefact constructed by looking backwards to a presumed golden age of national symbolism. France, *une et indivisible*, was always central to that myth, and France was unusual in having, or, as Nora revealingly puts it, *giving itself* – that is, bestowing upon itself – a national emblem, a national anthem, a national holiday, and a national motto. The French panoply of national symbols is unusually formalised, compared, for example, to the United Kingdom, which, if anything, is at the other end of the spectrum in its lack of a national day, no national emblem, a disputed flag and anthem, and no national motto.

Are national days over?

Why should any of this matter? We began this book by pointing to the critique of national days: that they are not 'banal' and ubiquitous in the way of national flags and other symbols; that many rest on a

religious base which cannot be sustained in a secular society; and that commerce and capitalism have squeezed out the opportunity to have a genuine national holiday for all workers. We live in 24/7 times. There is never a point at which all workers are *en fête*. And yet we are not convinced that national days have had their day. This book shows how national days come to be so through some complex social and cultural struggles; that we learn much about the structuring of power by the way national days are, or are not, done. There is an apposite comment by the Scottish writer, William McIlvanney, that national identity is a bit like an insurance policy; you know you've got one somewhere, you're not at all sure where it is, and you can't recall the small print. Analysing national days is a bit like that. For the social scientist, their value is heuristic. What they are, how they are celebrated, and by whom reveals much about the societies in which they occur. For example, that France imposed hers by virtue of the republican tradition; that the history of national days in Germany is contorted and contested; that the British don't even have one; that the Swedes recently invented theirs, and the Norwegians settled on one to distinguish themselves from bigger, more powerful, neighbours reveals much about the national narratives in question. As Vera Simon observes in her chapter, a national day 'highlights frictions within society and reveals a plurality of competing actors and interpretations of the national past and their ramifications for the present' (see above p. 152). Perhaps a key role for national days is to serve as a reminder of both coherences and contradictions held in the collective versions of the past.

National days are interesting too in terms of how people actually use them. Magnus Rodell in his chapter on Sweden finishes on an important point: '… the failure to celebrate the national day in the manner of the French, or the Norwegians, does not necessarily reveal a lack of national identity. On the contrary, it is merely another form of such an identity.' National days and days of commemoration can be seen as invitations (not requirements) to be national, either actively by celebrating the day or event, or passively, by simply noting that others do it, or the fact that it happens at all. Having a barbecue in the back garden may well be a way of being national. In this regard, the point made by Nora about tourism and entertainment might be turned on its head. We might see the role of tourists as reinforcers, or at least reminders, that they expect something, and as a result the inhabitants are inveigled into responding. In Scotland, for example, the tourist industry is credited (or blamed, depending on one's point of view)

with raising expectations about national events: Hogmanay, for example, is now a touristic event rather than one which requires neighbours to 'first-foot' each other clutching black bun and lumps of coal. Scots now 'do' Hogmanay in the touristic manner, and of course, became 'extras' in the theatrical performance which this requires. The lack of formal celebration on St. Andrew's Day may puzzle visitors, but the internationalisation of Robert Burns and his iconic Suppers helps both to reinforce Scottish national identity for natives and visitors alike (not to mention both within and beyond Scotland in terms of observance). The latest Scottish *touristfest* 'Homecoming 2009' stretches over a whole year, and is an excuse for many parties and affirmations of national identity. 'Here's tae us', if you can stand the pace.

Patently, there is no simple or single template of 'national days'. Their significance lies, like litmus paper, in what they tell us about social, cultural and political processes. Despite their malleability, they cannot simply be 'invented'. There is no British Day, not for want of trying, but because it cannot be made to stick without offending one national group or another; because there are few genuine British-national symbols, apart from flag, anthem and monarchy, but these are disputed symbols, notably among the non-English peoples of these islands. If and when the English become comfortable with their own (non-British) national identity, we might see much of that 'nation-building' process formulated around the national day, St. George's Day. If and when it takes off, we will know that the English have rediscovered, possibly reinvented, themselves as nationals. As Michael Skey points out in his chapter, national days have the capacity to shape national identity rather than simply reflect it. In other words, how, and if, people choose to celebrate the national day tells us a lot about changing aspects of national identity and nation-ness. National identity is not some essentialised badge which people carry around with them. It is the result of a complex interaction between historical memories, current social, political and cultural processes, and people's own predilection for self-identification. They are also part of what Bell has called 'mythscape': 'the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly' (Bell, 2003: 66). In that contest, national days are key markers of national narratives in which political actors are constantly engaged. Whose story is being told, and in what ways, is a key part of seemingly esoteric discussions about national days, their form and content.

Conclusion

We are at the beginning of our understanding of national days. They are important keys to our understanding of national identities which, for the most part, are hidden and partial; in Billig's term, banal. They are heuristic devices for getting at national identity, and it is precisely because they are framed by national narratives, processual and temporal, which makes them central to the study of national identity and nationalism, its political analogue. So what do we need to know? Curiously, given their importance, we know relatively little about them. We are at the beginning of our understanding, not at the end, and this book seeks to make its contribution and encourage debate. We need, however, to know more about what types of national days there are, because, as we have seen, they have a variety of origins and formats. Some are religious, some secular; some are overtly political, and others avowedly cultural. There seems to be a flux in their meaning, as they are imbued with changing meanings and significances. They seem to serve different social and economic interests at different times. Their content and substance varies: from the carnivalesque and the personal, through to the grand marches with military bands. There are significant marketing opportunities for touristic authorities to exploit, even re-invent. There is a complex process of forgetting, survival, *re*vival, renewal and reinterpretation. There is no inevitability about them: we need to understand why some national days are, to use Benedict Anderson's term, actively forgotten. Why is it that some national days seem to be deliberately ignored; what message do they hold, that to release it would evoke demons and threats? A purely utilitarian account of national days, for example, that medieval saints' days are redundant in a secular age fails to explain why long-dead, or even mythical, saints become the focus of nationalist ardour and political struggle. In this respect, national days become the focal points for ritual commemoration, not simply, or even, marking the past, but pointers to the future.

In many way, we have only begun to take national days seriously, and the authors of this book offer it as a means of generating interest in and debate about a taken-for-granted icon, which ebbs and flows according to tensions and conflicts over what it means to be 'national', and what are deemed appropriate ways of expressing it. National days are about 'marking time' in the national narratives; who we are and what we wish to become.

Notes

1 It is a measure of its significance that at the time of writing, if one 'googled' it, there were 154 million references to '9/11'.
2 Such dates will be known to most Scots, whereas those in other countries which happen to share the iconic dates may be less certain, or quite ignorant. 1314 is the battle of Bannockburn where the Scots defeated the English army; 1603 when the Union of Scottish and English Crowns took place; 1707 when the respective parliaments were unified; and 1999 when the devolved Scottish parliament was opened.

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